

Michelle Akers Bows Out of Olympics Due to Injury; Women's Soccer Legend Retires From International Play

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CHICAGO (Thursday, August 24, 2000) - The greatest women's soccer player in history has decided she can play no more. United States Women's National Team midfielder Michelle Akers - whose career is in itself a living history of the U.S. National Team - announced today that she will not compete in the 2000 Olympic Games due to an injured shoulder and her long-time battle with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

"After winning the gold medal in 1996, I promised myself to never again play in the condition I was in during those Olympic games," said Akers. "Since then, retirement has been a big issue with me and the decision to continue on with the national team has always been a prayerful and careful one. This year was no exception, and after the 1999 World Cup, I wrestled for months about whether to play or not, but eventually decided to go for it because I knew unless I was absolutely sure I had spent every possible ounce of myself trying to play, I would beat myself up with second guessing for the rest of my life. But after battling back from a messed up shoulder and making the Olympic Team, I found myself at the end -- physically and mentally -- with a body ready for a M*A*S*H unit. It has been a hard fought year, and the decision not to go to Sydney was just as agonizing, but I have huge peace in knowing I fought to the very end and have nothing else to give."

Akers' retirement from international soccer after an historic 15-year career marks the end of an era. Akers, 34, played in the first-ever U.S. Women's National Team match on Aug. 18, 1985, against Italy, and was the top scorer at the first-ever Women's World Cup in 1991, pounding in 10 goals to become the first American to win a Golden Boot at a FIFA competition. She was also awarded the Silver Ball as the second most valuable player in the tournament behind teammate Carin Garbara.

An athlete that was surely ahead of her time, Akers' combination of speed, power and strength, as well as her artistry with the ball at her feet, made the 5-foot-10 thoroughbred with her distinctive mane of flowing curls, a player feared and respected world-wide. She was the first female player to earn a shoe-endorsement contract and the first female player to gain national and global fame in her sport. During her time with the national team, women's soccer grew from its humble beginnings into one of the most popular sports for girls and women in the U.S., and was pulled into the mainstream through the hard work and dedication the U.S. players and Akers, who became a role model for hundreds of thousands of young girls across the country. Her warm personality, unique sense of humor and ability to talk to people of all walks of life further endeared her to fans wherever she traveled.

A thundering center-forward at the '91 Women's World Cup as a member of the famed Triple-Edge Sword, which also included fellow strikers Gabarra and April Heinrichs, Akers dominated a game like no player before or after her. She changed roles leading up to the 1996 Olympics, dropping into the

midfield where her play-making skills and composure on the ball could be more utilized while the beatings she took with her back to the goal would be greatly reduced. Her superior feel for the game, her unparalleled talent to shoot from distance and her dominance in the air and on the ground into tackles, was on display during the '96 Olympics and 1999 Women's World Cup, when fans saw why she was one of the fiercest competitors to ever play women's soccer.

Akers, however, had been hampered by injuries almost her entire career, enduring more than a dozen knee surgeries, numerous concussions, a broken cheekbone and related nasal surgery, and most recently a dislocated shoulder, suffered last March 27. Her well-documented struggles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome hampered her training for the last eight years, and it is a testament to her extraordinary mental and physical toughness that she was able to endure this long, helping the USA win the Women's World Cup last summer with an inspired performance that earned her the Bronze Ball as the tournament's third most valuable player.

"It is a rare thing for someone with her injuries and illnesses to battle as hard and long as she has to stay on the best women's soccer team in the world," said Dr. Mark Adams, who served as the USA's team physician for the 1996 Olympics and the 1999 Women's World Cup, and will do so again in Australia. "However, this combination of problems and setbacks makes it very difficult for Michelle to play to the level that she expects of herself. She's a warrior in every sense of the word, but it became clear to the team medical staff and to Michelle that this was the time step back."

This year, Akers struggled to return from the shoulder injury and the ensuing surgery on April 6 that caused her to miss almost all of the USA's Olympic preparation matches, finally returning to the team during its European tour in July and played well enough to earn a spot on the 18-player Olympic roster. But Akers re-injured her shoulder against Russia on Aug. 15, and citing a weariness of the constant maintenance of her CFS in order to perform at the international level, decided to resign her position on the Olympic Team. Akers is still planning on playing for the WUSA franchise in Orlando, Fla., when the new women's professional league starts up in April of 2001.

"The shoulder injury has definitely been one of the toughest ever," added Akers. "Not only because of the physical pain, the surgery, and the rehabilitation, but because of the mental anguish that goes along with trying to come back in a short time frame to make the Olympic team and then having to deal with setback after setback and complication after complication, all the while knowing that every day and every hour counts as to whether you will make it back in time or not. This year just seems to have been a non-stop climb of Mt. Everest with 80 mile gale winds at my face. But even in saying that, I know that to climb a mountain, one only needs to put one foot in front of the other and hopefully, if you do that long enough, you eventually reach the summit. That's how it has been in years past for me, and that's how I fully expected it to be this year. I knew it would be tough and I knew I would want to quit at times, but I have always been able to find something from somewhere to pull me through. Unfortunately though, things did not relent, and instead of catching a much-needed break as in the past, this time, things only got tougher. I finally said to myself, this is insane. I was taking IV's like Gatorade and getting injections and taking meds for pain. Icepacks and tape were a part of my wardrobe. I was battling at my absolute gut level to just get through the day, and finally, the last straw was that I re-injured the shoulder. Finally, I just said, enough is enough. I am no good to myself like this, and I am certainly no good to my team."

The Olympics in Australia was to be Akers' last international tournament, but instead a glorious chapter in Women's National Team history comes to a close a month earlier. One of just four players in soccer

history to score more than 100 career goals, her 105 goals puts her in a tie for third all-time with long-retired Italian Carolina Morace. She scored her 100th goal against Portugal on Jan. 30, 1999, in Ft. Lauderdale. Akers scored her first goal on Aug. 21, 1985, in a 2-2 tie with Denmark in the second-ever women's national team match, and scored her final goal against Russia on Aug. 13, 2000, in Annapolis, Md. as the USA won, 7-1. If not with her struggle with injuries and illness that caused her to miss numerous games over the years, Akers would likely have retired as the world's all-time cap leader and scorer.

Akers scored both goals in the 1991 Women's World Cup Final as the USA defeated Norway, 2-1, in Guangzhou, China, to win its first world championship. Akers started suffering extreme fatigue and a litany of medical problems in 1992, and after months of struggles to not only diagnose her CFS, but also to find ways to cope with it, she recovered enough to start in the 1995 Women's World Cup in Sweden, only to suffer a concussion and injured knee during a head-to-head collision with a Chinese player just seven minutes into the opening game. She did not play again until the semifinal, when she went 90 minutes on the damaged knee as the USA lost its only game in world championship play, 1-0, to eventual champion Norway.

But Akers rebounded to play a critical and emotional role as the USA won the first Olympic gold medal for women's soccer in 1996. She scored crucial goals in both the 1996 Olympics and 1999 Women's World Cup (where she was named to the all-tournament team) to help the USA to championships, and ends her career with two Women's World Cup titles and an Olympic gold medal.

Akers retires as the national team's second all-time leading scorer (behind Mia Hamm) with 105 goals, 37 assists and 247 total points. She is currently seventh in all-time appearances with 153. She is tied for the U.S. record for most goals in a game (five against Taiwan in the 1991 Women's World Cup) and is the all-time leading scorer in the history of the Women's World Cup with 12 goals. She holds the U.S. record for most goals and points in a calendar year when she pumped in an amazing 39 goals in just 26 matches in 1991. She also holds the record for most consecutive games with a goal at nine.

"Up to this point, I haven't had the opportunity to look back over my career," said Akers. "But I have to say all the trophies and championships are a far second to all the incredible people I have played along side and worked with over the years. Really and truly, my team is world class, more so off the field than they are on and they are a big part of the reason I have lasted 15 years as a national team player. I will miss them tremendously."

Akers is a three-time U.S. Soccer Chevrolet Female Athlete of the Year, so honored most recently in 1999. In 1998, just prior to the World Cup in France, she received FIFA's highest honor, the FIFA Order of Merit, for her positive contributions to the game. Akers, who has been looking forward to life after soccer for quite a while, has been very active off the field as well, making numerous speeches and appearances as well as doing work for her Soccer Outreach International organization. She recently published her second book - *The Game and the Glory* - which chronicles her life, her struggles and her triumphs.

"I plan to cheer my team on to win gold in Sydney," added Akers. "But I also plan on getting my body fixed and taking a much needed vacation in a top secret place with lots of horseback riding. Beyond that, I will be involved in the WUSA and soccer in some capacity. I also plan to train and coach athletes to reach their peak performance in partnership with the Sports Specific Training group in Orlando,

Florida. I'm also going to work with my organization, Soccer Outreach International, to help inspire and enable kids to become leaders with character and purpose. Lastly, but definitely not least, I will begin my long awaited career as a cowgirl on my farm in Georgia."

Akers, several U.S. team physicians and U.S. head coach April Heinrichs will be available to answer questions from the media via conference tomorrow at 1 p.m. ET.

| Michelle Akers Career Stats | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Year | GP/GS | Min. | G | A | Pts. |
| 1985 | 2/2 | 180 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| 1986 | 5/5 | 380 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1987 | 9/8 | 450 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| 1988 | 2/2 | 150 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 1990 | 6/5 | 420 | 9 | 0 | 18 |
| 1991 | 26/24 | 1926 | 39 | 7 | 85 |
| 1993 | 12/12 | 882 | 6 | 7 | 19 |
| 1994 | 12/7 | 521 | 11 | 7 | 29 |
| 1995 | 18/17 | 1202 | 15 | 5 | 35 |
| 1996 | 17/16 | 1244 | 7 | 3 | 17 |
| 1997 | 2/2 | 180 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| 1998 | 15/15 | 932 | 5 | 3 | 13 |
| 1999 | 20/18 | 1336 | 6 | 1 | 13 |
| 2000 | 7/3 | 238 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Totals | 153/136 | 9,981 | 105 | 37 | 247 |